

# Fleeing Hurricane Rita

Austin

By SHEETAL NASTA

Houston

Columbus

Eagle Lake

Wallis

On September 21, Sheetal Nasta was one of 2.5 million drivers stuck in the record-setting gridlock that resulted from the evacuation of Houston, Texas, in anticipation of Hurricane Rita's landfall. This is the account of her 243-kilometer, 30-hour journey to her parents' home in Austin.

## Monday, September 19

It is six days before Tropical Storm Rita is projected to churn into a devastating hurricane and make landfall on the Texas coast. Residents of Houston, an energy industry hub, obsessively check the National Hurricane Center Web site, tracking advisories and projections. After witnessing Hurricane Katrina ravage New Orleans, we're wondering whether to stay or leave, and when. The storm moving toward us has the potential to morph into a Category 5, 250-kilometer per hour hurricane, able to grind anything in its path.

Many of my co-workers will be flying to New York or Washington, D.C., locations of the company's other offices. I opt to work from Austin, normally a three-hour drive away, where I can stay with my family. I plan to start Wednesday evening, ahead of what might be a rush. My boss reminds me to fill my car's gas tank.

## Tuesday, September 20

By now, most people have a plan, even if it is boarding up the windows and hunkering down. By afternoon, Rita is a hurricane, Category 2, with sustained winds of 160 kilometers per hour.

By evening, news channels are reporting that the mayor, who has already asked for voluntary evacuation, will make it mandatory in coastal areas the next day. Hardware and home improvement stores are out of batteries, flashlights and plywood for boarding up windows. Grocery stores are running out of bottled

water, even food. There are long lines for gasoline as far west as Austin. And for anyone without a booked hotel room or airline ticket for wherever they are heading, it's probably too late.

## Wednesday, September 21

At the office, a morning management meeting puts the evacuation plan in motion. Rita is now a Category 5 hurricane, heading straight for us. I pack up my desk. It's by a window, 38 floors up. I'm told the windows tend to pop out in high winds and suck papers into the hazy Houston sky.

At home, I make similar preparations to leave while glancing at local TV stations that seem to be on auto repeat: Storm tracker. Evacuation map. Traffic update. Repeat. They were urging evacuees to focus on getting to safety and not waste time worrying about their possessions. I think, "Does that really need to be said?" But then, my own emotional confusion and stress surprises me. Usually when I go to Austin for a weekend, I grab a few clothes and toiletries, toss them into a bag and onto the backseat of the car. This time was different. Everything in my apartment is magnified, and every item is a decision. There are possessions I couldn't possibly take, large items. There are things small enough to take, but time is a factor. In the end I take my most commonly worn clothes and shoes, laundry, laptop, my painting supplies, file box of important papers, jewelry and passport.

Everything else, whatever I can lift, I place on higher ground—my bed.





RON HEFLIN © AP/WIDE

*Storm evacuees stand on the side of Highway 290, near Houston, which has become a parking lot as people attempt to flee Hurricane Rita on September 22.*

indefinitely.

I have not prepared for 30 hours on the road. I don't have much water or food. I also realize I don't have the car charger for the cell phone, my only resource for information besides the radio. And, the worst fear of all, I could run out of gas. Like most others, I turn off the air conditioner and roll down the windows, in spite of the suffocating heat and humidity.

**3:30 a.m.**

Hour five and I'm still less than 11 kilometers from where I started.

The highway is transforming into an impromptu social scene. Many evacuees are traveling in caravans. As they get restless, they spill out of their cars to chat with relatives and friends or just raid the cooler in the trunk. A man at the wheel of a truck nearby pops open what looks like a can of beer. Others switch drivers or pull over onto the shoulder lane to rest. One man hangs out the door of a van and lets out a catcall in my direction. "At a time like this?"

**6:30 a.m.**

Eight hours later, I see landmarks that tell me I would be within 30 minutes from home if this were a normal trip, speeding past at 110-130 kilometers per hour. Now, at a near standstill, every building, every sign comes into sharp focus.

As day breaks, I notice what people have deemed important enough to take with them. One couple had the foresight to get a U-Haul moving truck. Pick-up truck beds are piled high with everything from furniture to pet cages, expensive toys and cases of bottled water. Vans and sport utility vehicles have belongings balanced on their roofs.

I get my first good glimpse into a flat, old sports car that has been in the lane next to mine all night. There is a cage hanging from the rearview mirror, with two or three birds in it. There are two small kids in the front passenger seat, and the driver, presumably the mother, is holding a baby in her lap, while driving a manual transmission. Later, the passenger door opens and a man, who apparently has been resting in the back seat, pops out to trade places with the mom.

It's breakfast time. From cars with more than one passenger, people are emerging and hopping highway dividers and rails to make their way to convenience stores along the highway in search of food, water or gasoline, maybe even restrooms. If they're lucky, the stores are open. And then if they are open, they hope there is still food and water on the shelves and gas in the pumps. A radio station is reporting all these are scarce along all evacuation routes.

I call a friend to tell her to leave immediately or she won't make it ahead of the storm. She's paralyzed by indecision. Houston residents are caught between subjecting themselves to endless hours on the highway or riding out the storm at home. Moreover, if they haven't already filled their car fuel tanks, they

**10:34 p.m.**

Too late.

I enter the highway and am immediately halted by car tail lights streaming into the horizon.

I call my family to let them know I've left. Usually, that gives them an idea of when to expect me. Today, I say, "I have no idea when I might get there. It could take all night." My father questions my wisdom in leaving at night, a woman driving alone. But normal considerations are out the window. If I don't leave tonight, I may never get out. I may have to stay and face the storm. Tomorrow, I would find the same tail lights awaiting me, the same number of hours ahead of me—except Rita will be that much closer.

Besides, I'm not alone. There are hundreds of thousands of Houstonites on the road with me, inching along at one mile per hour. I get to know the neighboring cars and there is some comfort in that familiarity.

**Thursday, September 22, 1:30 a.m.**

Three hours and two to three kilometers later it starts to dawn on me: 240 kilometers to Austin at an average eight kilometers per hour equals 30 hours. And no one seems to know it. There is either all-too-cheerful music or static on the radio. The news updates are still treating the situation as barely more than rush-hour traffic, with frequent updates on traffic routes and speeds—except all routes are bumper-to-bumper for 320-plus kilometers,



*People wait in line at a convenience store in Pasadena, Texas, buying supplies before evacuating the Houston area on September 22, prior to Hurricane Rita's arrival.*

are probably out of luck. My friend decides to stay put. I'm tempted to turn back myself. For the near half-day I've spent on the highway, it would take me less than an hour to get back home.

The absurdity of the experience is heightened by the news that Rita may turn east toward Louisiana and miss us altogether. But as of now, the radio news reporters are still urging us to have patience and keep going; Houston is officially still in danger.

Still, it's maddening to see cars on the opposite side of the highway, zooming toward Houston and the coast, unencumbered, while we endure the umpteenth hour on the road. Later that morning, the city announces an "unprecedented" contra-flow plan, which will change the direction of the flow of traffic in those eastbound lanes to decongest westbound flow. It's the first sign of relief. Unfortunately, it takes them hours longer than anticipated to gather the manpower and other resources needed to move the concrete dividers and safely change the direction of traffic flow.

**Noon**

Nearly 15 hours later, I'm still within 50 kilometers of Houston. I've run out of water and the snacks I had. I'm hungry, sleepy and exhausted. And now the sun is beating down on us. In fact, the radio is reporting it's the hottest day of summer, with temperatures well above 38 degrees Celsius. To conserve gas, people are now doing more than turn off their air conditioners. They are putting the cars in neutral and pushing them along, inch by inch. Many have run out of gas or had mechanical failures.

In the left-most lane nearest to the highway divider, I lean out the window to spot a water jug half-full of urine.

Pit stops are hardly an option. Exits have been closed to prevent further congestion and disruptions to the flow of traffic, so it's difficult to get on or off the highway, especially since the feeder roads are also bumper-to-bumper.

However, further down the road and an hour or two later, I find an open exit. I take it, hoping to find a store or hotel. Eventually one appears. To me, an oasis. In plain sight of it, however, I still have to wait in painfully slow traffic to get to the parking lot entrance.

I use my air conditioner every now and then in two-minute bursts for some intermittent relief. At one point, my eyes fixate on a case of bottled water sitting against the rear window of the car in front of me. I can't take my eyes off it, when a man appears out of nowhere with a box, walking between the lanes of cars, handing out bottles of water. I don't know who he is or why he's giving away water, but, like a beggar, I ask if he can spare one.

**2:00 p.m.**

At the store, I stock up on water and snacks, charge my phone and I am back on the road. Cell phone networks are as congested as the highways, but I manage to get through to my family eventually. Fortunately, a colleague's call gets through to me and he gives me directions for an alternate route, just in time for me to actually take it. And, soon, for the first time since I left, about 15 hours later, I am actually using my accelerator.

**11:00 p.m.**

I reach the half-way point, which normally takes me about 90 minutes to reach from Houston. This too by using the oncoming, eastbound lane. But I have another 13 to 15 hours to go.

My parents have driven from Austin to meet me, with gasoline and an extra driver to relieve me. Our phones haven't been connecting, but I've passed a message through a cousin that we'll meet at the McDonald's. I don't know for sure if there is one or where it would be exactly. But when I get there, I see them standing anxiously by the side of the road. My mother befriends the owner of a nearby hotel, on the basis that both are Gujarati. Their hotel is full, but they're willing to put us up.

We decide to push on, with another car in tow. The two passengers, like many others stranded there, have little gas left and no food, and local stores are stripped clean. We give them half of the gasoline my father brought, and save half in case I need it.

**Friday, September 23, 4:00 a.m.**

We reach my parents' home in Austin, nearly 30 hours after I left Houston.

**Saturday, September 24**

Rita makes landfall as a Category 3 hurricane well north and east of Houston, near the Texas-Louisiana border. However, evacuees are discouraged from returning. Gas stations are not restocked. Restaurants along the routes back to Houston are sold out and closed. And parts of Houston are without power. Many are in a rush to leave shelters and get back to survey the damage, where there is any. Some of us fear another gridlock, with everyone returning at once. The mayor specifies an evacuee return plan based on which part of Houston we live in. I work from Austin and return to Houston a week later. □

**About the Author:** Sheetal Nasta is a writer based in Houston, Texas.